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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to identify characteristics considered important by personnel directors when reviewing resumes. Findings were obtained from questionnaires completed by 166 respondents located throughout the Midwest. Results suggest that there are very definite opinions held by individuals whose function is frequently to review resumes. A short, neat, well-organized outline of work experience and qualifications is a necessity for obtaining interviews. An effective resume reflects a definite career objective and provides information about major qualifications and career goals. Although personal details may be helpful, no item was considered essential by a majority of respondents. Essential items concerning education are schools attended, dates attended, degrees awarded, major and minor fields of study, and grade-point average. Information on all full-time experience is considered essential and should include job title, place and dates of employment, and responsibilities. Employers are evenly divided concerning the listing of references. If references are included, three should be used, and information should include complete name, company name, address, and telephone number. The length of the resume should be restricted to two pages or even one page. (DF)

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RESUMES: THE QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

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ABSTRACT

The job search becomes increasingly challenging each year. One of the two tools essential in the job search is the resume. A successful resume is one that produces the desired action for the job seeker--an interview.

The purpose of this study was to identify characteristics considered important by personnel directors when reviewing resumes. Findings were obtained from questionnaires completed by 166 respondents located throughout the Midwest. Information pertained to personal details, education, experience, references, format, length, duplication, preferences, and reasons for rejection.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of educators is to try to equip students with the knowledge and skill necessary to be effective, productive individuals in the work force. Students spend years in a classroom environment absorbing information that may (or may not) help them when they finally reach the ranks of the employed. How much time is spent teaching them how to obtain that job? This is, after all, the toughest assignment they must face. The job search becomes increasingly challenging each year. While the approach used to obtain a job has not changed, the competition has definitely increased.

The two tools essential in the job search are the letter of application and the resume. According to C. Randall Powell, "The resume is the most important communication tool in a job hunter's tool box. It is close to impossible to land an assignment of a technical, professional, or managerial type without one" (Powell, 1981, p. 129).

Even though educators may be able to convince students of the importance of the resume, students frequently encounter problems because they like to take a sample resume out of a textbook, change the statistics, and type their names at the top. While textbook models may be good examples, students are not using their creativity in designing a document that is representative of the individual. As Lola Coxford points out, "A resume is a highly personal and individual summary of a person's background, experience, training and skills" (Coxford, 1982, p. 4).

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Obviously, a successful resume is one that produces the desired action for the job seeker--an interview. Joyce Lain Kennedy reminds us that two things must always be considered in preparing the resume: "what the employer wants and what you want" (Kennedy, 1984, p. 9).

It is the first of these two wants that prompted this study. We were convinced that personnel directors could tell us what they look for when searching for prospective employees.

METHOD USED FOR THIS STUDY

To obtain information regarding the perceptions and opinions of the practitioners in the field, we constructed a questionnaire. The questionnaire was also designed to provide the respondents with the opportunity to express their opinions and articulate their viewpoints on a number of specific questions dealing with resume characteristics.

The purpose of this study was to determine through systematic evaluation those criteria which are important in characterizing applicants. Additionally, it was the purpose of this study to gather information about the following: What should be included in a resume? Should the resume be arranged in a chronological or functional format? Will a professionally printed resume impress the reader more than an individually prepared one? How long should the resume be? These and other questions were addressed.

Well-qualified people are frequently not considered for good positions because of poor resumes. . . . Less qualified persons will greatly improve their chance to get interviews and offers by developing good resumes. (Jackson, 1981, p.10)

The questionnaire contained a number of questions which covered specific areas such as personal details, education, experience, references, and general characteristics pertaining to the resume. To simplify the tabulation of the data, a number of questions were designed to be answered with a checkmark. All of the respondents completed the questionnaire, and in many cases additional comments were provided which added an interesting dimension to this study.

The questionnaire was sent to 400 personnel directors of organizations which receive a Kelce School of Business and Economics student placement directory each year. These organizations are located throughout the United States and represent both large and small companies which produce a wide variety of goods and services. Our response was very good--166 of the 400 companies surveyed completed and returned the questionnaire. This was a 41.5 percent response rate. Actually, 130 responses were received; however, 14 of these were not included in

this study because they were received after the requested return date. Because the response to this study was excellent, we believe the information obtained is both relevant and current. We further believe it will be of immense value in educating students and others regarding resumes which accurately represent an individual to a prospective employer.

DISCUSSION

We now discuss certain information categories about the respondents.

Personal Details

This section deals with personal details. Table I shows the response to the questions pertaining to this topic. Both career objectives and major qualifications are an important component of a resume. Many respondents also indicated that career goals and personal details were important. Their importance was not as great as the first two mentioned, and to many respondents the latter two details should not be mentioned within the resume. The personal details which are the most important to those individuals who initially evaluate resumes are career objectives and major qualifications. Both of these details require development and refinement by the individual whose resume is being evaluated to be of value in job hunting.

Table I. Personal Details

Do you recommend using any of the following on resumes:

	YES (percent)	NO (percent)
Career Objective	88.00%	12.00%
Major Qualifications	97.00	3.00
Career Goals	76.00	24.00
Personal Details	72.00	28.00

Table II further expands and clarifies the information provided in Table I. In this table a number of personal factors were evaluated as being essential, helpful, or unimportant by the individuals who will evaluate the resume. The responses clearly indicate that height, a photograph, race, and religion are unimportant. The only personal detail considered essential by a significant number of respondents was citizenship. Those personal details considered helpful were health, age/birthdate, and military service. This result suggests that most personal details are not really essential in a resume.

Table II. Personal Factors

If you recommend including personal details on the resume, classify each of the following categories as either Essential, Helpful, or Unimportant.

	ESSENTIAL (%)	HELPFUL (%)	UNIMPORTANT (%)
Citizenship	39.00	35.00	26.00
Health	23.00	48.00	29.00
Age/birthdate	22.00	46.00	32.00
Military Service	18.00	60.00	22.00
Marital Status	11.00	44.00	45.00
Sex	8.00	27.00	65.00
Number of Children	7.00	27.00	66.00
Weight	5.00	21.00	74.00
Height	4.00	25.00	71.00
Photograph	1.00	22.00	77.00
Race	3.00	20.00	77.00
Religion	0.00	7.00	93.00

In response to what additional information should be listed under personal data, the most frequently mentioned was geographical preference. Apparently this is useful information for the resume evaluator to have and is helpful at later stages in the employment process.

Education

There was a very strong indication that six items regarding the educational background of individuals were significant. These items represented 50 percent of the items mentioned and are found in Table III. It is quite apparent that the college or university attended, dates attended, degrees awarded, major, minor, and overall grade-point average are essential items of information. This information is extremely helpful in providing background information and assists in the screening process. Three information items considered helpful but not essential were professional organizations, leadership positions held, and related courses. Information such as this apparently provides

"insights" into the individual and his or her interests and is useful in determining or projecting future behavior and expectations. The least essential item in the essential category was sororities/fraternities. Membership in these organizations is no longer, possibly, believed to be so important as in prior years.

Table III. Education Details

Evaluate each of the following areas according to whether you believe them be to Essential, Helpful, or Unimportant.

	<u>ESSENTIAL</u> (%)	<u>HELPFUL</u> (%)	<u>UNIMPORTANT</u> (%)
Colleges/Universities	90.00	10.00	0.00
Dates Attended	82.00	16.00	23.00
Degrees Awarded	90.00	8.00	2.00
Major	85.00	23.00	2.00
Minor	58.00	39.00	3.00
Overall Grade Point Average	52.00	42.00	6.00
GPA in Major	49.00	48.00	3.00
Leadership Positions Held	40.00	55.00	5.00
Professional Organizations	23.00	66.00	6.00
Name of High School	15.00	42.00	32.00
Related Courses	25.00	62.00	13.00
Sororities/Fraternities	9.00	53.00	38.00

Experience

In the area of experience five items were considered to be essential for those assessing the resume of a potential employee. As presented in Table IV, the items considered to be essential were dates of employment, place of employment, job responsibilities, full-time employment, and job title. Reasons for leaving a job and part-time employment were considered essential but not to the degree of the others.

All of these items should provide background information about an individual which would be very useful and could easily be verified. In addition, this information would provide some detail concerning the applicant's experience, skills, and qualifications. It is also possible that clues or insights regarding one's personality may also be provided or areas where additional information is needed may be identified.

Table IV. Experience Details

Evaluate each of the following areas according to whether you believe them to be Essential, Helpful, or Unimportant.

	<u>ESSENTIAL</u> (%)	<u>HELPFUL</u> (%)	<u>UNIMPORTANT</u> (%)
Dates of Employment	95.00	5.00	0.00
Place of Employment	93.00	7.00	0.00
Job Responsibilities	88.00	12.00	0.00
Full-Time Employment	77.00	23.00	0.00
Job Title	74.00	25.00	1.00
Reasons for Leaving a Job	59.00	37.00	4.00
Part-Time Employment	55.00	41.00	4.00

It was obvious that the respondents believed very strongly that all work experience be identified. The replies to this specific question were 24 percent, only relevant experience, and 76 percent all experience. In response to how far back one should go in identifying work experience, the responses were 13 percent for 0-4 years, 39 percent for 5-10 years, and 48 percent for all experience. These responses clearly indicate that all previous work experience should be identified and presented in the resume for review and evaluation.

References

The response to preference for references being listed or available upon request was very interesting because the responses were distributed evenly. Of the respondents, 49 percent indicated that references should be listed, whereas 51 percent responded that they should be available upon request. This divided opinion represents uncertainty in this area, and should be the subject for further research.

When asked whether references were requested of all applicants, the response was 65 percent "Yes" and 35 percent "No." This seems to indicate that many firms do not believe that references provide accurate information. Perhaps individuals/organizations are reluctant to provide anything but good "references" for individuals because of the present environment.

When asked how many references are preferred, the number given most frequently was three. This apparently is the magic number which allows for some degree of verification and evaluation. Additional references are not useful since they will not be contacted.

The responses as to whom the respondents recommend as references were mixed. They are as follows: 51 percent, teachers; 86 percent,

former employers; 7 percent, ministers; 60 percent, business people. In evaluating these responses, one can interpret them in many different ways depending upon one's point of view. Regarding other groups used as references, there was not any one specific group identified as the dominant group. Evidently one may indicate whomever he or she desires as a reference.

Most individuals indicated that references were contacted by telephone. In fact, 86 percent used the telephone, and 36 percent used letters to contact references. Apparently many organizations use both methods. The responses as to how frequently references are contacted were again mixed. When responding, 49 percent answered "always," 50 percent answered "sometimes," and 1 percent answered "never." The overwhelming response as to when references are contacted was after the interview (88 percent). Only 12 percent responded that references are contacted before the interview is held. Most individuals evaluating potential employees apparently believe that contacts with references can be more productive after the interview. Specific questions may be asked; also, probing for further information is possible and more meaningful after the interview.

Table V provides information on what should be included in regard to references provided in the resume. The item mentioned most frequently was the telephone number, which correlates with the very frequent telephone contact of references. Providing of organizational titles for references seems to be unclear. It is the least essential of the "essential" category, the most helpful of the "helpful" category, and the most unimportant of the "unimportant" category. Further research will be needed to clarify and interpret this response.

In response to whether any other information regarding references should be included, the following were given: 7 percent "Yes" and 93 percent "No." There was not a definitive identification of what the "Yes" information should be within these responses.

Table V. Reference Details

If references are included on the resume, which of the following do you consider Essential, Helpful, or Unimportant?

	ESSENTIAL (%)	HELPFUL (%)	UNIMPORTANT (%)
Telephone Number	84.00	15.00	1.00
Complete Name of Reference	81.00	18.00	1.00
Company Name	81.00	19.00	0.00
City, State, Zip Code	77.00	22.00	1.00
Street Address	74.00	25.00	1.00
Business Title	56.00	42.00	2.00
Relationship to Applicant	57.00	38.00	5.00
Courtesy Title (Mr. Mrs. Miss)	22.00	46.00	32.00

Chronological versus Functional

The respondents in this study very definitely preferred chronological resumes to functional resumes. This supports the earlier findings of this study in regard to what is essential in terms of career objectives, work experience, and education. The chronological format emphasizes these important areas and provides a perspective and ordering of events that is not provided by the functional approach. In addition, this format allows the heart of the resume work experience to receive the most space and emphasis and provides the appropriate approach for the individual who has held a series of progressively better jobs. This approach also allows direct communication of one's past performance and probable future performance.

Two items were mentioned by the majority of the respondents as to what they especially look for on a resume. These were (1) relevant work experience and (2) neatness and conciseness. Again, these are important aspects which can be easily identified and provide a quick and easy method to evaluate an individual. One can project from the work experience that the skills and qualifications needed for the job are possessed by the applicant. A neat, nice appearing, well-organized resume perhaps says as much about an individual as does its content.

Reasons for Rejection

On the other hand, the reasons suggested for rejecting an application were (1) too long and (2) messy appearance/mistakes. Certainly these support the findings that long, messy resumes will be rejected on that basis rather than on the basis of content. This reaction was further supported by the answer to the question on importance of the resume's appearance.

The answer given was "extremely important," again suggesting that the appearance of a resume is a sensitive indicator and important method for screening an individual out of the employment process.

In response to the question of the effect of typographical errors, misspelled words, incorrect word divisions, smears, or smudges on a resume, the answer given simply stated was "immediate rejection." This again emphasizes the importance of appearance and neatness of the resume in the mind of the evaluator.

Resume Length

The respondents indicated that there was a preferred length of pages (83 percent "Yes" and 17 percent "No"). Most of the respondents desired a resume two pages or less in length. Very few individuals indicated they would evaluate a resume that was longer than two pages. Apparently these individuals believe they do not have the time or inclination to read a lengthy document (over two pages) which provides much more detail than is necessary at this point in the employment procedure. Two pages is the absolute maximum to insure that a resume will be reviewed. Most of the respondents indicated it was their belief that the reduction of long resumes was not acceptable because the reduction

makes a resume too difficult to read. We believe this would only be the case if the resume was difficult to read originally.

Kind of Copy

Table VI presents interesting findings regarding the kind of copy (original, photostatic, or printed) used for resumes. The majority of respondents had no preference. However, this only indicates that if the resume is neat, attractive, well organized, and mistake free, it is acceptable. There was a difference of opinion regarding the color of paper for the resume. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents indicated white bond was preferred, 3 percent indicated pastel bond was preferred, and 59 percent indicated no preference. Again this indicates the color is not so important as the appearance, neatness, and mistake-free form.

Table VI. Resume Copy

Do you prefer resumes that are:

	(%)
Original Documents	26.00
Photostatic Copies	10.00
Professionally Printed	27.00
No Preference	56.00

Desired Salary

Fifty-two percent of the respondents suggested that a desired or current salary should be mentioned on the resume. Twenty-seven percent mentioned that it should not, and 21 percent stated it was unimportant. Current or desired salary amounts may be important because they can provide a reference point to help ascertain whether the applicant is too expensive or underpriced for the market. They also may be the basis for many questions which can be best addressed in the interview session.

CONCLUSION

Our conclusion in this study suggests there are very definite opinions held by those individuals whose function is frequently to review resumes. A short, neat, well-organized outline of work experience and qualifications is a necessity for obtaining interviews. Its purpose is to attract the attention of prospective employers and to interest them in what one can contribute as a potential employee. It is a tool to let one open the door; when it is successful, it allows the

applicant the opportunity to go into detail about background and qualifications. The resume is an identification card; the applicant should make sure this identification is appropriate.

The elimination of extraneous detail regarding personal factors is extremely helpful and will strengthen the possibility of the resume's being evaluated. The resume should be a vehicle of communication addressing the employer's needs, and directed toward that specific objective. A resume which is too lengthy will probably be rejected because of the time constraints.

We hypothesized from this study that an effective resume has a definite career objective and provides information about major qualifications and career goals.

Personal details may be helpful, but no item is considered essential by a majority of respondents.

Essential items concerning education are colleges/universities attended, dates attended, degrees awarded, major and minor fields of study, and grade-point average.

Full-time experience is an essential category. Information should include job title, place of employment, dates of employment, and job responsibilities. All experience should be included.

Employers are evenly divided concerning the listing of references on the resume. If references are included, three should be used; and essential information should include complete name, company name, address, and telephone number.

If a resume is to be considered by personnel directors, it must be neat and attractive, free of errors, and restricted to two pages or even one page.

Job applicants should follow these guidelines to develop a word portrait that is positive and effective.

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